

METRO ATLANTA'S CLEAN WATER INITIATIVE

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REFERENCE: *Proceedings of the 2001 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, held March 26-27, 2001, at the University of Georgia. Kathryn J. Hatcher, editor, Institute of Ecology, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

Abstract. The Clean Water Initiative was formed in April 2000 to study metro Atlanta's growing water quality challenges and recommend a framework to address these challenges. A task force of diverse and influential leaders was assembled to study regional water quality issues and reach consensus on the strategies and structures this region should employ to address these challenges.

The task force reached its final recommendations in October 2000. The focus of the recommendations was the creation of a "Metro Atlanta Water Planning District" for a sixteen county area in metro Atlanta. These recommendations have formed the basis for legislation introduced by the Governor in the 2001 session of the Georgia General Assembly.

INTRODUCTION

The Clean Water Initiative was a project convened by the metro Atlanta business community through the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and the Regional Business Coalition. The Initiative proved to be an effective model for focusing attention on an environmental problem, developing consensus on a plan for action and achieving the political momentum necessary to implement the plan. The objective of this paper is to provide a general background of the issues and describe the Clean Water Initiative process and results.

Legislation that closely tracks the Clean Water Initiative recommendations was introduced in the state Senate in February 2001. Senate Bill 130 would create a "Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District." As of this writing, the bill has passed the Senate by a vote of 50 to 4 and has moved to the House of Representatives.

BACKGROUND

Metro Atlanta has experienced tremendous growth in the last few decades. It has doubled its population since 1979 and is now home to almost 4 million

people. In the last 10 years, the Atlanta region was second only to Los Angeles in terms of population growth, and is second to none in terms of geographic spread. This growing population has demanded more water, created more wastewater and developed more land. This has led to serious water quality challenges, particularly with regard to stormwater and wastewater.

- Pollutants from non-point sources (stormwater run-off) contribute to 80% of water quality impairments in metro Atlanta. Currently over 1000 miles of rivers and streams in metro Atlanta fail to meet water quality standards. Many waters remain to be tested. Most of these impairments are from fecal coliform bacteria. There is no comprehensive plan for managing non-point source pollution among local governments in the region.
- Metro Atlanta rivers are nearing their capacity for accepting wastewater (sewage treatment) discharges. This constraint is a function of the volume of wastewater produced by the region (over 400 million gallons each day), heat loads from power plants who use water for cooling purposes and the small rivers accepting these discharges. State modeling shows that under critical low-flow conditions, applicable dissolved oxygen standards on the Chattahoochee River would be violated, even if all permit conditions were met.
- Wastewater treatment infrastructure has not kept up with the development that has occurred. There are approximately one million people served by septic tanks in the metro region. In addition to their water quality impact, septic tanks do not maximize the return of treated wastewater to our rivers to replenish our limited supply.
- Georgia is under one of the most aggressive schedules in the nation to develop pollutant

budgets pursuant to the Federal Clean Water Act. As the result of a federal lawsuit, basins encompassing metro Atlanta are required to develop Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) "pollution budgets" by 2003 for all waters that fail to meet water quality standards. Thereafter, these "budgets" will have to be implemented.

TMDL implementation plans are now being developed. Local land-use decision makers will come under increasing pressure to control stormwater runoff in order for TMDL budgets to be met. At the same time, there is a related and increasing trend in Georgia towards linking general, watershed planning requirements with regulatory actions such as wastewater discharge permits.

Metro Atlanta's water profile is unique relative to most other major metropolitan areas. The region's water quality challenges are driven in part by its small rivers. Metro Atlanta relies on surface water for 98% of its water needs and is at or near the headwaters of those rivers. All rivers flowing through metro Atlanta either originate in metro Atlanta, or in north Georgia. While the Chattahoochee Basin supplies approximately 75% of the water for the metro region and over 40% of the water for the state, it is one of the smallest river basins serving as the major source of water for any major metropolitan area in the nation. Small rivers have limited capacity to assimilate pollutants without violating water quality standards.

Metro Atlanta's fragmented local government structure and the fact that the region sits in portions of six different water basins also makes it difficult to achieve a coordinated, watershed-based approach. There are over 123 separate local governments in the Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area - 20 counties and 103 cities. These separate jurisdictions have each traditionally dealt with water quality and wastewater issues on their own based on political boundaries or service-delivery areas. This has not proven to be an effective strategy for the management and protection of the region's water resources.

THE CLEAN WATER INITIATIVE PROCESS

With this background, the Clean Water Initiative was convened as a joint project of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and the Regional Business Coalition. Beginning in early 2000, these business organizations sought to construct a process that would: 1) Provide greater focus and awareness of the

water quality challenges; 2) Develop specific recommendations on how to address these challenges; and 3) Create the momentum and influence necessary for these recommendations to clear the legislative process and be implemented.

The Task Force

In April 2000, the Initiative convened a diverse task force of leaders from throughout the metro region and the state. The 37 member task force included:

- CEO's and business leaders;
- Director of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD);
- Ranking republican and democratic legislators from the Georgia House and Senate;
- Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) appointees: Chairmen of the Gwinnett, Cobb, Fulton and Clayton County Commissions, and the Chief Operating Officer of the City of Atlanta;
- Representatives from the Georgia Municipal Association and the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia;
- Chairman of the Georgia Department of Industry, Trade & Tourism;
- President of the Greater Atlanta Homebuilders Association;
- Downstream representatives from Columbus, Albany and LaGrange; and
- Chairmen of the Georgia Conservancy and Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, and board members of Trust For Public Land and the Nature Conservancy.

This task force was co-chaired by Bill Dahlberg, Chairman and CEO of The Southern Company and Ray Weeks, Vice-Chairman of Duke-Weeks Realty Corporation.

The task force held eight public meetings from May to October 2000. These meetings involved presentations of information on the region's water quality challenges as well as profiles of potential solutions. The initial meetings were heavy on presentation and the latter meetings involved more discussion of solution options.

The Initiative sought to explore four questions:

- Where are we now as a region?
- What are the implications of doing nothing more than we are doing now?

- What have other regions done to address these issues?
- As a region, what do we need to do to effectively address these issues?

Geographic Scope

For purposes of the Initiative, the study area consisted of the 10 counties comprising the Atlanta Regional Commission (Fulton, Gwinnett, Cobb, Clayton, Rockdale, Fayette, DeKalb, Cherokee, Henry and Douglas) plus Hall and Forsyth counties, abutting Lake Lanier. It was determined that this was a manageable study area and that these counties exemplified the water quality issues faced by the fast-growing metro region as a whole. It was also desirable to have representatives on the task force from each county in the study region, while still maintaining a manageable task force.

Consulting/ Presentation Materials

Substantial pro-bono consulting was provided by The Boston Consulting Group (BCG). Their focus was on translating fairly complex information and data into clear, understandable terms. BCG is not a water or environmental consulting firm. This proved to be an asset as the majority of the task force were not water experts either.

The working team conducted hundreds of interviews with water and environmental professionals and developed this information into a presentation format. Presentations were basic and easy to understand. This served to bring the entire task force along at the same rate and develop a sound understanding of the basic problems and challenges faced by the region.

Over 1000 copies of spiral-bound presentation materials and appendices were distributed at the task force meetings. Immediately following task force meetings, these presentations were also placed on dedicated website, where interested parties could download them (www.CleanWaterInitiative.com).

Public Input

All meetings were open to the public and heavily attended. Certain meetings were designated as input sessions and over 30 organizations and individuals gave presentations from a wide variety of perspectives. Interested organizations were also encouraged to submit comments/ presentations on the

issues that were posted on the website for download by the public.

Communication

In order to create a broader public understanding of the issues and acceptance of potential solutions, it was determined that the Initiative would have to take on the attributes of a political campaign with regard to the media. Media alerts and briefing materials were sent to the media before each task force meeting, and press-releases summarized each task force meeting after it occurred. Press briefings were set up before the meetings and the press was encouraged to interview task force members or attendees at the meetings.

Print, television and radio media from the Atlanta region were represented at each of the task force meetings. Editorial boards of major newspapers statewide were also briefed on the issues and the Initiative. The fact that Georgia is in the third year of a record drought served to increase attention to the subject of water resources.

THE CLEAN WATER INITIATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS AND FINAL REPORT

Task force meetings from May through August concentrated on stormwater, wastewater capacity constraints and the implications of the TMDL lawsuit in metro Atlanta. The task force also examined how other regions in the U.S. and in Europe had successfully addressed water quality challenges. These case studies examined the specific strategies employed, governance structures that were used and options for funding stormwater management.

As the Initiative progressed, there appeared to be wide agreement on central premises. The status quo was not an option. Something different needed to happen. The region needed coordinated planning between political jurisdictions. Enforcement and real "teeth" were needed to ensure that necessary action would be taken and that plans would be implemented.

From polling during the meetings, there was near-unanimous agreement on "what" needed to be done in terms of specific strategies for the improvement of water quality, stormwater management and wastewater treatment. The more controversial elements of the recommendations proved to be the question of "who" or "what entity" should do this work. Among the questions:

- Should this be an existing or new entity?
- Should its responsibilities include enforcement?
- How should it be governed?
- Who should be on the board and how would they get there?
- What should the geographic scope of this entity be and what relationship does this have with hydrology? 16 counties? 28 counties?

Through individual meetings with each task force member and anonymous voting on various alternatives during the final two task force meetings, consensus was achieved in the October meeting. The resulting recommendation was supported by approximately 80% of task force members.

The final recommendations involve the establishment of a **Metro Atlanta Water Planning District** and detail its responsibilities, governance and enforcement mechanisms. Among the key elements:

- A self-governed District to develop watershed management plans for a 16 county region;
- Plans to include stormwater management, wastewater infrastructure, water supply forecasts and water conservation planning;
- Timelines and performance benchmarks;
- Governance by a 35 person board consisting of 19 elected officials and 16 citizens;
- Approval of these plans by the state and enforcement of plans by EPD through existing regulatory authority and water-related permits;
- Separate Basin Advisory Councils for each basin in the District; and
- Funding role of the State through appropriations for planning, access to State bond funds and grants.

The final recommendations and a 22 page Final Report were released in November 2000. In addition to detailing the recommendations, the Final Report summarizes the region's water quality challenges and solutions in "plain English" with a liberal use of pictorials and diagrams. To date, over 6,000 copies of this final report have been distributed and more are being printed.

How does this District relate to the rest of the State?

Effective management of water will require planning on multiple levels. In addition to statewide

and basin-wide planning, regional and local planning is needed. Due to its rapid growth and development, metro Atlanta has been identified as an area where a *regional* water planning district is appropriate to address its particular issues.

Upon the development of a statewide comprehensive water management plan for Georgia, plans created by this district will be rolled-in and modified as necessary. In any event, issues such as the withdrawal/allocation of water and water-related permitting remain state-level issues. The role of this District is simply to coordinate planning necessary to achieve better overall stewardship of these shared water resources.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to devise and execute a process that can change longstanding practices regarding the management of water resources on a regional basis. This Initiative completed its work in a short period of time and successfully achieved the political momentum necessary to accomplish near-term results - legislation that closely mirrors the recommendations and is on its way to becoming a reality.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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